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Pan-Africa - Stories & Incidents

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A Story of West African Mother-Love

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POUNDING MEAL IN THE OCINE.

AT DAWN

A Story of West African Mother-Love

By LYDIA I. WELLMAN

The stars were paling in the sky over a little West African village when Kanende pushed open the door of the hut to see if the morning were fair. The other occupants of the one room, father, mother, her two little sisters and Samba, the baby boy still slept. Kanende had waited a long time for someone in the village to stir, now she would wait no longer. She knew how to awaken the lazy ones! So she tucked her **epeka* securely under her armpits and shook the dust out of her frizzly little braids to complete her toilette.

The fire on the bare earth floor was almost gone, but Kanende found one little twinkling coal and, holding it carefully in her palm, she flew across the †*epata* to the cookhouse. Softly she opened the door. Kneeling, she blew the tiny coal to a blaze and soon had a bright fire going. Now they should awaken! The big **ocine* stood near, half full of corn waiting to be pounded. Seizing the pounding stick Kanende raised it as high as her nine-year-old strength would permit, then she let it fall upon the corn in the ocine. Again and again she raised the stick, again and again she let it fall.

* Pro. ā pā'ka. A two-yard piece of cloth worn by children as their one article of clothing.

† Pro. ā pah'ta. The hut enclosure, family door yard. This word is the nearest approach to "Home" in the Umbundu language.

Kā nēn'de means little dove.

* Pro. O chē nay. A mortar.

"Ndu-ndu! Nud-ndu!" sang the pounding stick and at the deep-throated challenge the doors of all the brown houses flew open and in a few moments other fires were blazing and pounding sticks were being wielded with energy, for thus does the African woman resemble that virtuous one sung of so long ago—

"She riseth while it is yet night
And giveth food to her household."

True, the giving may be delayed for some hours, but throughout her whole existence, from the first dawn of womanhood to the last flicker of it, the muscle and wits of the woman are bent on this one elemental thing that by incessant toil must she bring forth bread to the eater.

"You are not tall enough to raise the pounding stick," said †Nakanende as she came into the cook-house. "You may bring water; the corn needs wetting." For half an hour the measured rhythm of the pounding arose and fell. Some of the women sang the song of the ocine as they labored. The stars grew paler and at last winked out altogether. Forest and field began to murmur the hymn of awakening life and day had begun.

For little Kanende, brown, slender, dirty, yet more than half winsome in her eager childishness, it was to be a great day, for she was going with her mother to the white man's settlement three hours distant. The white people had been there for over a year holding a school of which Kanende had heard. Once the white man and woman had visited the village but the district was large and they would not come again until next season. One could go to them but Kanende's people had not seen fit to accept the invitation, at least the women had not,

† Nā kănċn'de. Mother of Kanende.

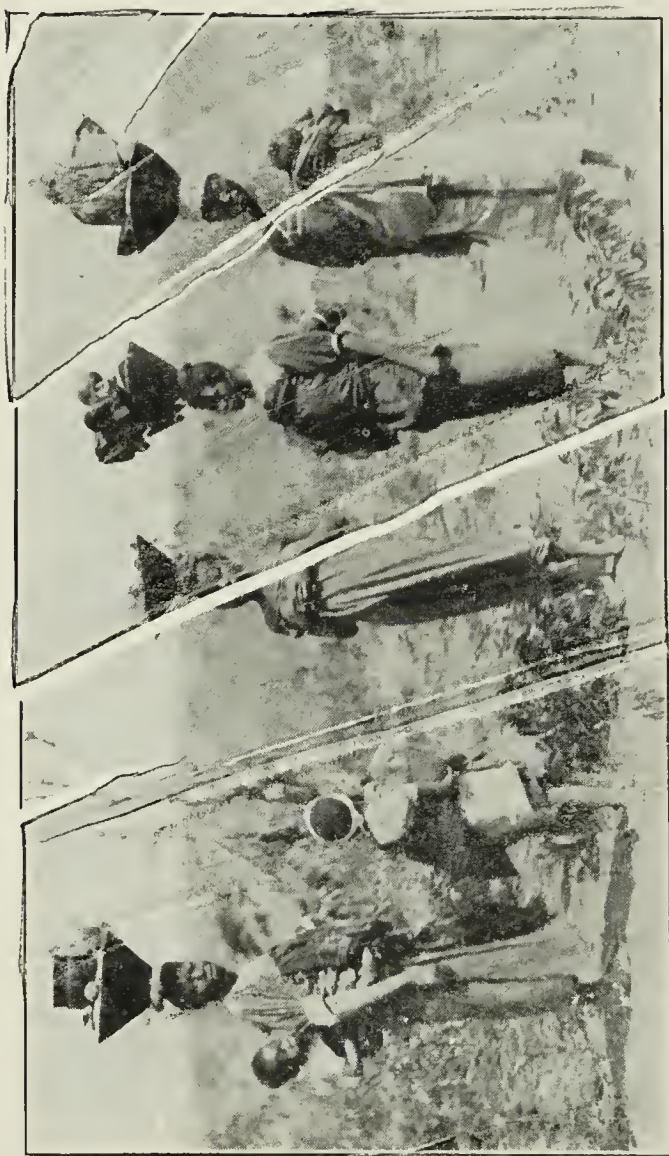
but Kanjimbo, Kanende's cousin, had been at the settlement one whole month and had come back with his head so full of the things of the school that his father had sent him on a trading trip, hoping he would forget. Books for boys and writing for girls! Nonsense!

So this would be Kanende's first visit. Her mother was taking a big basket of meal which she would exchange for cloth and Kanende would carry a smaller basket of beans for which she, too, would get cloth. She smiled at the happy possibility as she helped her mother spread out the freshly pounded meal on wide grass trays. The sun would ripen the meal and in the evening her mother would stir a part of it into a stiff sticky mush and they would all eat.

In the meantime little Samba had awakened and Kanende went to him. She placed the fat little boy astride her hips and, drawing a cloth over him, she tied the corners across her own spare front after the manner of women. His fat little person was against hers, his soft hand beat a tattoo on her shoulders, he gurgled and cooed as any healthy baby would do. There was no finer child.

Nakanende rolled and pushed the bed mats aside, then she drew from the cook-house fire a large mandioc root which had been roasting there. A goodly portion was sent to her husband, who was talking with the men in the **onjango*. Each of the little girls had a piece, too, and the choice bits were reserved for Samba with some cold mush, which she forced down his throat. The seven months' old baby resented this process, his stomach was full of that which Nature had provided for such as he, but his mother laughed at his struggles and the other

* On jän'go. Sitting room of men.



WOMEN CARRYING FOOD.

women came to see and to offer encouragement in the unequal contest.

"Give him plenty of mush and beans," said one old woman. "I bore five children and I fed them all. They died in childhood, two of them before their teeth were through. If I had fed them more mush and beans they might not have gone from me," and she shook her head gloomily.

"Samba is always well," began Nakanende proudly, then she checked herself, for the air was full of spirits who envied her the child. She had had a charm put on his wrist when he was but a few days old. It was a little flat blue bead, ugly, but it had done its work well. She intended to buy another charm with the cloth she would get for the meal sold today.

But the morning work was done and why should women stand about while the fields waited? Soon a long line of them with baskets, hoes and babies, followed by a motley line of little girls, were off for the day's digging. Four or five women were going with Nakanende. It was a morning for gay chatter. Kanende, at the tail of the procession, listened to their talk, of twins born in the next village, of the making of beer pots, of old Samasele's illness, of the coming rains. The women moved with easy, even steps, each with her basket of meal on her head. Nakanende had a double load, for she carried Samba.

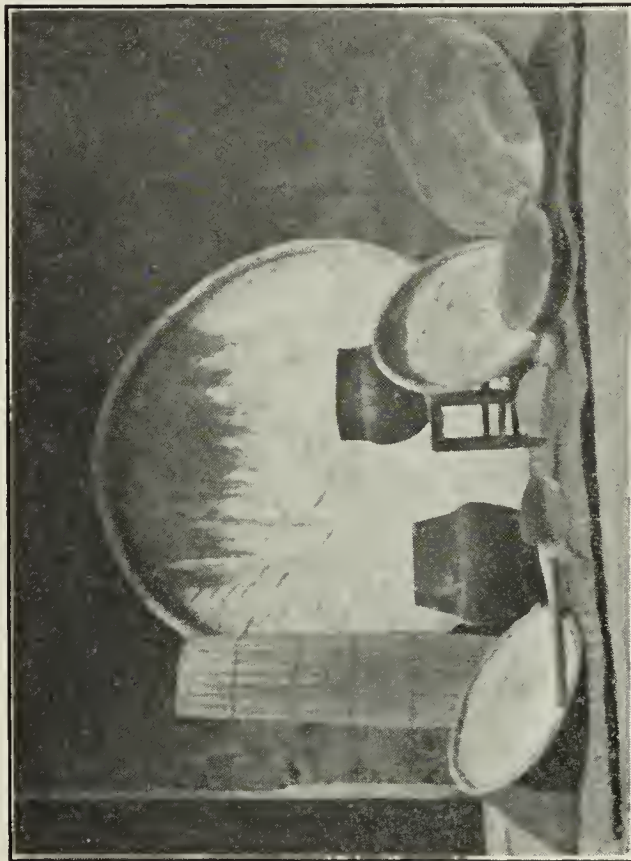
At the settlement Nakanende unloosed the baby from her back and nursed him. Soon the white woman came out and greeted them pleasantly. She brought a little stool for each and made them sit. She bought all their meal and beans. She begged to be allowed to hold Samba and sang him a song about a baby's toes which made the women laugh aloud.

"Is it permitted to see the inside of the house?" they asked. The white woman led the way. The house was small, but full of surprises. Where could food be found to fill so many plates? Was that a bed, really, and white blankets? And mats on the floor and a mysterious little box on a shelf that said "Tick-tick, tick-tick"; the women almost ran away when they heard it, but the white woman reassured them and, sitting down to a sort of table, she brought forth such magical music with her fingers that they fairly thrilled with the sweetness and longing of it, and when she sang in their own tongue in time to the music they were motionless with wonder.

"It is a song of our school," she explained. "A song of a wonderful Friend who loves each of us. He told us to come and help you. He is your Friend, too. He keeps me all the days and I never lack any good thing. He will keep you, too, if you take Him for your Friend."

"Never fear and never lack any good thing." Those were the words that Kanende carried away with her. Warm and tired as they were when they reached the *epata* they must go to the fields for a little digging and for firewood. Samba cried and Nakanende laid him in the shade of a tree on some leaves. The little sisters stood by to watch that too many flies did not crawl into his mouth and Kanende helped her mother with the digging. The sun was low when they returned to the village, then there was the fire to be made and the mush to be stirred. The mush was served in little baskets with beans in clay saucers. It was the one full meal of the day. The men and boys ate in the *onjango* and the women and girls in the *epata*. They ate with their fingers, brushing the crumbs from their lips with the backs of their hands. Even

The large tray for drying meal, the two round ones and the upright one for sifting. Large basket for carrying meal, corn, etc. Smaller one to eat from. Clay pots to cook in and to carry water for cooking. Hoes used by women in all field work.



the tiniest baby had to be fed and the fingers that had been digging all day, still unwashed, pushed the mush and beans into the little mouths. Then evening came and it was dark in the African village. At full moon there would be a great dance, but now there was nothing to do but to unroll the bed mats in the smoke begrimed, unventilated huts and go to sleep.

In the night Kanende was awakened by her mother's voice. "Samba's head is hot," she said. By the light of the fire they looked at his face. He seemed as well as usual, dimpled and sleepy, but the next morning he was indeed sick. Nakanende sat with him in the hut and could not speak when the women came to comfort her. The child groaned and breathed heavily. The women ventured some remedies, but his head grew hotter and the paroxysms of pain more frequent. At noon the witch doctor came.

"We will divine at once," he ordered. Speedily the crowd gathered in the hut and around it. Kanende sat where she could hear every breath the baby drew. Sickness made fear and she was terrified for her brother. The witch doctor had smeared his face with white clay and loaded his person with charms, skulls of small animals, teeth and bits of skin. Surely the evil spirits would fear him.

Slowly and monotonously the chant of the diviner arose. After the chant he blew sacred ashes over the child and its mother. Then he bathed his hands in a little clay pot filled with water which he had brought into the hut. Intently the black faces watched him, breathlessly they hung on every movement. With dripping hands he took the child upon his lap. "I seek that which has brought illness to him," he said, passing his hands firmly over the naked little body. Again and again he moved

them searchingly over the little form. The child, soothed by the touch of the cool water, lay quiet. Suddenly the witch doctor started. With apparent effort he withdrew his hands from the object of his search. "I have it," he cried, and there in his palm lay a bit of glass, no larger than a thumb nail, but pointed and hard and glistening. "By his side this entered at the will of the spirits. I have removed the cause. Take your child and nourish him."

The people who watched did not know that the diviner had secreted the bit of glass in the water and at the proper moment had brought it out between his fingers. To them it was a wonder and with a gasp of relief Nakanende clasped her baby to her breast, but he did not respond to her caresses. The chat began again, the air was close and mysterious. Those who waited crowded the door. Samba lay panting for breath and not until late in the afternoon did the women withdraw for the mush stirring and even the witch doctor, wearied by his own frenzy, left the hut for his evening meal.

The next day Samba was no better. He lay with eyes half closed moaning feebly. In the afternoon there was a second divination. The witch doctor gashed the little body in many places with a sharp knife.

Another night of sleepless anxiety. How different was the dawn from that day when Kanende awakened the village! Her father was worn and haggard, her mother speechless. Samba seemed to be Samba no longer. Suddenly she recalled what the white woman had said about never being afraid and never lacking anything. Would this woman, who knew no fear, help them against the evil spirits? Timidly she put the question to her mother.



WOMEN MAKING BEER.

Nakanende was a woman of judgment and she turned the question over. She had incurred the suspicion of her relatives by allowing the child to become sick. A heavy fee must be paid for the divination. If Samba died she would suffer a severe penalty. The witch doctor was doing no good. The white people had evident power and wisdom, but if she went to them the villagers would be furious. Yet she would go and through the white woman seek the great Friend who supplied every lack. With a word to her husband she raised the child in her arms and left the hut. The women, busy in their cook houses, did not see her, as followed by her husband and Kanende she left the village. Then they rushed after her and strove to dissuade her from her purpose. The witch doctor pronounced a doom upon her, but the weight of that little body grown so limp and inert nerved her mother-heart and closing her ears to the words of vituperation and putting aside the restraining hands she took the path through the forest in the early dawn.

Pleasant faces greeted Nakanende and gentle voices welcomed her to the mission house. Tender hands took the sick child from her arms. For the first time Samba had a real bath while the missionary drew from the mother's lips the story of his illness. Quietly she explained that it was undoubtedly due to unwise feeding and exposure to the sun. Indeed he was a very sick child, but she would ask the great Friend to heal him, and sitting in her chair with the baby on her lap, she spoke to One who could not be seen, but who plainly was listening. How different was this from the chant of the diviner. The peace and calmness of the mission house reassured Nakanende. The missionary unfolded proper methods in caring for chil-

dren. All day she employed remedies which would bring healing and at evening Samba seemed more natural. A clean outer room was provided for Nakanende where she and Kanende might sleep and through the night the missionary and the father kept watch beside the bed where they had laid Samba, for Nakanende was exhausted. In the early morning her husband called her.

"Come and look at the child," he said. Nakanende sprang to her feet. What was this? Had she slept through the night instead of watching? What might they have done to her child? Like a flash she was beside him and bending over him. He slept, but the fever and the strained look had gone. As though he felt her presence he opened his eyes and stretched out his hands.

Once more dawn was purpling the African sky, glorious symbol of the morning that was to arise in Nakanende's benighted soul and in the souls of her people. Even now its first beams were struggling to enter there and the shadows wavered as with a prayer of gratitude which she did not know was a prayer she folded her baby in her arms.





